

ICPS newsletter®

A successful political platform reflects voter expectations

Voters pay equal attention to the essence of political platforms and to the personalities of party leaders. This is one of the conclusions of an ICPS study on ways of improving the effectiveness of party platforms. So far, political platforms have been viewed as an ineffective instrument and their role in elections was mostly declarative, but the fact that the upcoming Verkhovna Rada elections will be held on a strictly proportional basis will force participants in the race to pay more attention to the quality of their platforms. This trend is a positive step away from dirty tricks and towards open political competition

Parties lose votes when their programs are flawed

The majority of voters expect their political parties to offer realistic programs that are based on key voter needs and the national interest. Because Ukrainian parties mostly view platforms as a declarative feature of election campaigns, they are missing a real opportunity to gain voter support.

Despite the unsatisfactory quality of existing party platforms, 23.24% of those polled said that a party's programs and actions are the key factor that determines their preferences during an election. The number of people who put the personality of a party's leader first was slightly lower, 20.73%.

Researchers explain this shift of voter preferences from personalities to platforms as a feature of Ukrainian politics that is not inherent to other post-Soviet countries: the emergence of real political competition and entrenchment of political parties as the primary influence in state policy.

The results of the poll showed that the average voter not only realizes the key role of party platforms, but also understands what parties have to do to substantially improve the current situation. 52.13% of respondents think it necessary to organize broadbased public debate to develop political programs that reflect the needs and interests of the average Ukrainian; 44.63% are ready to actively participate in such debates; and 24.82% reckon that paying attention to voter interests is the best way to develop an effective political program. Yet only 15.63% of those polled felt that Ukraine's parties showed any

interest in their opinions and their needs when developing their platforms.

These are the main results of a sociological survey carried out by the International Centre for Policy Studies in March-April 2004 in six Ukrainian cities: Donetsk, Kolomiya (Ivano-Frankivsk oblast), Mykolayiv, Poltava, Striy (L'viv oblast), and Vinnytsia. A total of 2,400 individuals were interviewed.

"The survey completely destroys the myth that voters do not understand the significance of party platforms and are not ready to focus on them. The problem lies in the country's parties, which still believe in this myth and offer hollow political programs: nobody wants to read them," said ICPS Director Vira Nanivska, commenting on the outcome of the Center's research. "This study reveals that parties are actually not using the best way to get voters—engaging them in a debate of the party's own platform."

A high-quality platform is based on voter expectations

Ukrainian parties do not have a clear understanding of the mechanisms for involving interest groups in developing and debating their political platforms. But countries with longstanding experience with democratic systems have developed effective mechanisms for including primary voter expectations in party programs and—when in power—in public policy (see Fig. 1).

VOTERS. The process starts with studying the opinions and beliefs of individuals. Voters get involved in party activities by joining local voters' associations, local civic

associations, women's groups or youth clubs.

EVENTS. Events are organized to debate pressing policy issues through voters' associations or clubs in a variety of ways: town hall meetings, roundtables, telephone or mail-in public opinion polls, and general meetings of voters' associations.

RESOLUTIONS. Ideas voiced during these events are registered in the form of official resolutions that can either support current policy or suggest changes to it, call for specific actions, or outline principles for resolving problems.

VOTER ASSOCIATION AND VOTER CLUB MEETINGS. At the regular meetings of voter associations and clubs, delegates review such resolutions and prioritize them.

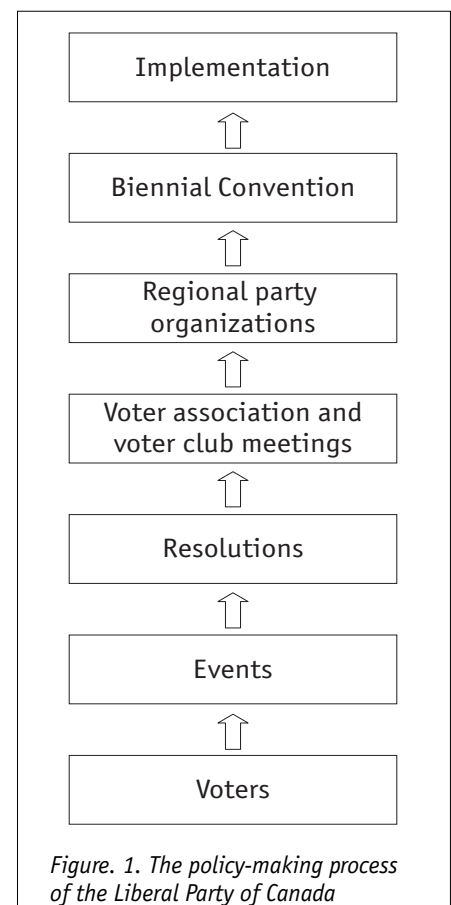


Figure. 1. The policy-making process of the Liberal Party of Canada

REGIONAL PARTY ORGANIZATIONS. Resolutions adopted by voter associations are submitted to the relevant regional party organization. There, they are debated once again, voted upon and prioritized. Each organization is expected to submit 10 resolutions, including two priority resolutions, to the party's biennial convention. The same number of resolutions can also be submitted by: the Aboriginal Peoples Commission, the National Women's Liberal Commission, the Young Liberals of Canada, the National Liberal Caucus and the National Standing Committee on Policy Development (SCOP).

BIENNIAL CONVENTION. Each voter association is represented by two delegates at the biennial convention. Each province, territory, and committee, the national closed sessions and the national standing committee submit two priority resolutions to each plenary session. Resolutions adopted at the plenary session become planks in the party's official platform.

IMPLEMENTATION. The Policy-Making Standing Committee monitors Government actions in terms of implementing these adopted resolutions and reports to the party in the period between the biennial conventions. In this way, voter associations and clubs function in an oversight capacity. This oversight is exercised through continuous consultations with Members of Parliament, senators and the ministers of relevant ministries, and the requirements for Government reports.

For more details read Policy Studies #17, "Party Policy" of February 2002.

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<http://www.icps.com.ua/eng/publications/ps.html>.

A system for evaluating political platforms arrives

Using the results of this study, ICPS has developed a system for analyzing, monitoring and evaluating party platforms which it unveiled 27 May 2004 at a presentation for political parties and civic organizations. This method makes it possible to evaluate the correlation between a party's basic program and its election platform, its position on key government policy issues, the correlation between of various planks in the party's platform and voter expectations, and so on. According to the system developers,

a high-quality political platform has to give voters answers to the questions, "What positions is this party taking and what will it actually do if it wins an election?"

In assessing a party's platform, the researchers listed a number of key factors:

- *The degree of correlation between the contents of a platform and the issues that matter most to voters.* This part of the assessment requires taking public opinion polls regarding the pressing issues, interests and expectations of voters. Such polls are an integral part of the evaluation process.
- *The degree of relevance of the priorities and the political course set in the platform.* An assessment of this criterion reveals how clearly the party's position is defined in relation to key public policy issues in various spheres of the life of the nation.
- *The degree of concreteness of the ways and means proposed in the platform for attaining the party's priorities.* In other words, how understandable the party's methods for carrying out its various planks are.

The study also analyzed party positions with respect to key public policy issues in four basic areas: politico-legal, socio-economic, national security and international cooperation, and the spiritual and cultural sphere.

The politico-legal sphere includes the following issues:

- principles for forming a national government;
- democratizing social relations;
- rule of law;
- local government and local officials.

The criteria for evaluating a party's position in this area are provisions of the party's platform regarding territorial divisions; forms of government organization; the principles for forming a Government and the structure of the executive; the place of non-government organizations in society; how to strengthen public oversight of the government; issues regarding a free and independent press, judiciary, and so on.

Socio-economic issues are reflected the party's position regarding:

- economic transformation;
- social security and guarantees to citizens.

These issues determine a party's position regarding private and state ownership, market values, tax policy, entrepreneurship, the farm sector and the sale of land, fiscal policy, other economic policy issues, combatting corruption, social guarantees, and so on.

National security and international cooperation issues include:

- foreign policy orientations;
- domestic policy orientations and defence priorities.

These issues will reveal what a party's platform says about sources of threat to national security and that party's attitude to deploying armed forces, strengthening the country's defenses, priority foreign policy directions, participation in military and political blocs, peacekeeping and anti-terrorist operations, civil oversight of the military, norms for social guarantees to the military, and so on.

The spiritual and cultural sphere includes:

- universal moral and cultural values and the free development of the individual;
- national spiritual and cultural values.

These issues demonstrate how a party's program views access to education, the arts, the language issue, preservation and development of the cultural inheritance of the Ukrainian people and other ethnic groups, scientific policy, religious and inter-confessional issues, and so on.

For more information on the evaluation criteria for political platforms, a full description (in Ukrainian) of the system is available at: http://www.icps.com.ua/doc/partyprograms_metodyka.pdf ■

This research is part of the "Public Participation in Public Dialog on Political Party Programs" project, implemented with the support of the Institute for Sustainable Communities (Montpelier, Vermont, US) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The working materials of the project can be viewed at: http://www.icps.com.ua/projects/party_policy.html. For additional information, contact Petro Udovenko by telephone at (380-44) 216-9883 or via e-mail at garant_kvali@icps.kiev.ua.

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